

## THE NEW PRIESTHOOD<sup>1</sup>

Now that this journal enters a new stage of its existence, it is well to take stock of circumstances, to consider its past career and present purpose. It was founded as a private enterprise to engage the leisure and activity of one who could never be idle, and who, combining the temperament and gifts of a publicist with pronounced ideas upon things that are fundamental, was able to make its pages a medium for his perceptions of truth among a wide following of personal friends. As its readers and its pages—the latter at first less than half their present number—increased, its original subtitle, indicating it to be “devoted to the search for God and the true self”—a purely personal quest,—became altered to “devoted to the study of Christian philosophy and the writings of the best Christian Mystics”—the same quest pursued along the path of literary research. Later on, so enamoured was the late editor of his favourite mystical author, he suggested restricting its purview solely to the works of Böhme, a proposal from which I dissuaded him. Whereupon, in an issue prefaced by a characteristic article by him entitled “As one sees more,” and as though passing from the theoretic to the practical, from the personal to the universal, from the records and perceptions of those who lived in the past to the conditions and needs of those living in the present, it became designated “a magazine of Christian Mysticism,” at which—for I must disregard hints given me from one or two quarters to delete the word “Christian”—it will remain. There never was, nor is there now, any expectation of its being commercially profitable. It was just a labour of love and

<sup>1</sup> Written on taking over the editorship of *The Seeker*, in 1913.

of consecrated talents, helped out by a few co-operants content to work upon the like terms; and if, in the matter of money for paper and print, ends did not meet—as they never quite did,—help from generous hands never failed to forthcome. Further, it was the organ of one who, although he had little of the cleric about him, was yet an accredited spokesman upon the deeper things, and who was able merely in virtue of his office, though he had other titles, to command respect for himself and his utterances. The venture had its ups and downs, and though its author swayed with them he continued bravely to push on. In the morning—of his hopes and exultation about the work—he sowed his seed; in the evening—of his doubt and disappointment—he withheld not his hand, knowing not which should prosper, this or that, or whether both should be alike good. Now, after eight years, as evidenced by the responses to the intimation given in the last issue recording his death, the universal word of his readers pronounces his work to have been found wholly good, and expresses the hope that the seed he sowed will not, because the husbandman has been withdrawn, be suffered forthwith and prematurely to perish. There is now, therefore, an established and not, as at first, altogether obscure journal, with an appreciative and increasing body of readers. There is evinced upon the part of many of its readers a sincere desire for help in attaining, what the journal was designed always to promote, personal realisation of the perfected life; and there is upon my own part a conviction that that desire, too often carried no further than contemplating examples of the mystical life and literature of the past, when different external conditions obtained from those in which we of to-day live, can be attained now in as full measure as ever it was by the great exemplars of the past, and will be attended by farther-reaching consequences (of which I shall say more presently); and that that attainment will involve a deeper understanding of the Christ-doctrine as it unfolds in this present age, and will testify to a larger manifestation of the Christ-power in this

outer world. It is in these circumstances that I have thought it not proper to withhold such slender service as I can give to a task which the late editor before his death, and his readers since, have urged me to assume.

In one respect, however, the change of editorship involves a somewhat violent transition, though one which probably is, and will be, felt most acutely by myself. It provides occasion for some reflections under the title heading this article; and although it is unavoidable that these should be susceptible of a personal bearing, it is earnestly desired that they will be interpreted as impersonally as possible and as intended to refer to a general phenomenon of which the transition referred to only chances to be illustrative. To come to a point, the passing of the conduct of this journal from clerical into lay hands, from a teacher officially accredited as a spokesman upon sacred things to one who holds neither warrant nor desire to assume a public or even a private rôle in that respect, is but an example of a fact characterising the present epoch, that the lead in the numerous phases of activity towards human enlightenment or amelioration seems to be passing out of professional into amateur, or at least unofficial, hands. There is no deliberate usurpation, no friction, no conscious rivalry. Merely the wheel of life has been quietly turning a little and is dislocating many traditional ideas and methods; is unveiling larger views of the social organism; is disclosing new human inter-relations, rights, and responsibilities; and awaking new temporal and spiritual necessities in adjusting the requirements of which the lay or unprofessional man, perhaps because he lives closer to the corporate life than his official brother, or is freer from trammels of authority and tradition, may happen to be the more useful instrument. Be that as it may, in the great uplift and Godward movement of to-day the chief executive agents of the spiritual force now surging through society are not (there are, of course, exceptions) the professional ministrants. They are the plain man and woman called, like the first Aposto-

late, out of the crowd, and upon whom have lain no hands save inward ones, that first bless and illumine with some new light-flash of truth, and forthwith bid their ambassadors go out, in a blaze of enthusiasm, into all the world and promulgate the new perception to the unawakened "nations." If the Churches are passing into a state of temporary obscurity and relative abeyance rather than, as I believe, into one of permanent disability, their partial paralysis still synchronises with the fact that an unprecedented spiritual tide is pouring into human life and that one of its widely diversified modes of manifesting is a strong religious feeling—utterly independent of academic theology and ecclesiastical authority—which, in its simpler form, displays itself in a desire to realise a sense of unity and brotherhood under a common Parent, and, in its more advanced phase, in an aspiration for a direct alliance between the human soul and its spiritual source—in other words, for mystical religion.

There is no need here to enlarge upon those modes of its manifestation which are not concerned with the direct quest of the soul for God. I am persuaded that those modes—the effort to improve social and industrial conditions, the awakening of the social consciousness, the co-ordination of the sexes, the enlargement of scientific and philosophic perception, the desire for the unarmed comity of nations and the transformation of the Great Powers into Great Loves, the exposure and destruction by literary authors and dramatists of false conventions and moral values, the Nietzschean dreams (however much misconceived) of a Super-humanity—are the effects of spiritual promptings both unfolding from within, and operant without, ourselves. Upon them all—*Veni Creator Spiritus!* This new uplift, this abnormal efflorescence of ameliorative desire and of self-sacrificing personal energy towards its fulfilment, are usually, and not untruly, attributed by rationalistic opinion to economic stress. But what is economic stress but the product of conditions of humanity's own creating, against which, in dissatis-

faction and revolt, it is now reacting—force of circumstances and human resistance to that force generating a *tertium quid*, the heat and motion of spiritual activity towards finding “a more excellent way”? To look deeper, economic stress is, in its result, nothing but a throw-back of the human spirit upon itself; an unease tending to set the face of man once more towards God; a “repining restlessness” of man’s soul in the presence of outward things, of which George Herbert speaks in his poem “The Pulley,” where he imagines God saying of man:—

Let him be rich and weary, that at least  
If goodness will not lead, yet weariness  
May toss him to My breast.

It is certain, too, that those prompted to lead or labour in these movements—in so far as they are selflessly actuated, and whether in their work or in themselves they formally acknowledge God or not—are strongly imbued with the characteristics of the mystic and enjoy a measure of mystical vision. Distributed among them one observes the ardour of the illuminate, the devotion of the mystical lover, the one-pointedness of the contemplative, the asceticism of the seer, the self-sacrifice of the saint. If the motive force of which they are the instruments remains concealed from them, that force still actuates them. Their gaze is directed perhaps but to outward things; they stand, as it were, with their backs to the altar of life, or at least by its side. But light is shining from behind and through them. Enough that they respond to its stimulus and are faithful to its promptings. They are building better than they know. They might disclaim the title, but they are of the new priesthood; *servi servorum Dei*; ministers who are flames of fire in their passion for a better order of things, a diviner kingdom upon earth.

The Christian Mystic worthy of the name differs from them only in respect of possessing conscious, perhaps intimate, relations with the energising source of all this new life. If others are priests, he is comparable to the high-priest, since he enters—as perhaps they do

not—into the Holy of Holies. His is the Eastward position at the world-altar; facing the sun with strong, confiding eyes. He knows that in this world-tumult, this modern clash of light and darkness, the “Sword”—the executive weapon—of the animating spirit of good is the Word of God, passing into more prominent manifestation in this outer world. He knows that that Word, latent in all men and things—without which is nothing that has been made,—can and must become patent. He knows that what is true for him as individual will eventually prove true for the mass; the part being but the measure of the whole. And, as individual, he knows, with an experimental knowledge, the secret and mystery of the Incarnation. He realises that what has passed into living truth in himself must outwork, and is gradually outworking, in other men, and in a variety of ways. He knows after what manner a certain light—a light which “is the life of men”—subtly operates; how its rays first penetrate the dark caverns of the natural intelligence, illuminating this recess and that; how it “becomes a lamp unto the feet (the lower mind) and a light unto the path” (of outward environment and of personal conduct therein); how within him it advances from fitful gleams until it becomes an abiding possession, an “ingrafted Word”; how that Word “increases and multiplies” within him, transmuting the inward man in the measure in which he is capable of self-surrender to its operation; until, expanding more and more from the centre of the lower nature which he has self-crucified to it—like the petals of the rose unfolding upon the old symbol of the Rosy-Cross—it organically associates with and transubstantiates the natural man. The Word is made flesh and dwells within him; the human is unified with the Divine; God becomes man *in him*.

This passing of what is popularly regarded solely as sacred history into present, personal mystery is the *Credo* and distinctive doctrine of the Christian Mystic. He quarrels not with those who can think only of the history and the letter, because they have not yet entered

personally into the mystery and the spirit. He knows that until they have so entered they cannot think otherwise, for the matter is one involving a realisation in consciousness. He knows that God fulfils Himself in history and many outward ways that serve, sacramentally and temporarily, to introduce the human mind to final truth; but that, last and most effectually of all, He fulfils Himself once and for ever within the personal consciousness of man, for whom thereafter all sacramental channels become abrogated, for when that which is perfect has come that which is in part can be done away.

But now a warning word. These high claims cannot be lightly asserted by any of himself. Blasphemy is attributed to "them which say they are Jews (initiates of the Word) and are not" (Rev. ii. 9). By whomsoever these claims are to be justified the conditions of entry into their priesthood must be discharged. The mystic life to-day, involving not merely personal reintegration in the Divine Life, but the ability to minister its bread and wine to others, is possible by no other means than have attended the realisation of the same life in the past. Outward circumstances have changed; it is they which have created the need for the new priesthood and which are instrumental in generating its priests: but the inward conditions of ordination have not on that account been suspended. The great saints and illuminates, about whom so significant an abundance of literature is published to-day, attained their fulness of being by fidelity to a path of progress of which the route is now thoroughly charted and the incidents scientifically defined. They achieved their goal for the most part alone, without benefit of guide-books (other than the Scriptures) available to us; in the cloister or the cell, segregated from the common life of men, their sight permitted to rest upon no image save a crucifix pendant from their prison walls—a St Bernard, for instance, sheltering his eyes as he passed among his native Swiss scenery that they might dwell upon no outward beauty. It was, I doubt not, within the providential order that such should be their method,

and that in the loosely knit social life of their times it should be their function so to live, that thereafter their memories might serve as beacon-lights and examples to a posterity among whom the process of sanctification was to become accomplished upon a larger scale and under the stress of far more consolidated social conditions. Those conditions have now come into being; with us things are how different! *Our* cloister is one of compulsory constriction amid the furious activity of modern life. Our cell of self-knowledge must be a shelter created by ourselves in the silent centre of the vortex of the preternatural activity of to-day. Our symbol of the Crucified is the humanity around us, in whom—though of yourself you may be able to say, He is risen!—He still suffers and is buried. For our "shewings" of the living Lord, expect Him to greet you amid the noise of a blatant world rather than in the seclusion and peace of an anchorite's apartment; for the sight and succour of celestial ministrants look where you might least expect them—not idling in pleasant solitudes, but where their presence most is needed; in unlovely places, in the retreats of misery and pain and unsucces, and amid the clamour of the imperceptive crowd. Go, say, into the surging human tide of a London thoroughfare and see, if you can, Who goes with it, and whether, intermingled with that hurtling mass of men, that tumult of hooting traffic, the chariots of God also are not twenty thousand, even thousands of angels.

And, as of yore, so too for us is there still need of austerities, mortifications, self-discipline. But where once, to reduce the carnal nature into subordination, these were self-inflicted and of artificial devising, the tense, closely woven conditions of modern life themselves now largely provide them. "We find our austerities ready-made," says Francis Thompson in his far-seeing essay, *Health and Holiness*. For many to-day "to live is itself an ascetic exercise. Man is his own mortification. Merely to front existence, for some, is a surrender of self; a choice of ineludibly rigorous abnegation." Once the difficulty was how



to subject the flesh; now the problem oftener is how to sustain it; so hard it is for some to secure means of subsistence at all, whilst with others, as the gross flesh wears thinner and less obstructive to the soul, so acutely sensitive to the jars of this rough world does the neural system become, that, for them, merely to wear a physical body is to bear a heavy cross, to endure an enforced *purgatorium*. Yet it is to these pains and limitations that the words apply, "O go your ways into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise"; your very miseries are the gates and courts of your approach to God; accept them, therefore, thankfully as such, and "serve the Lord with gladness."

In such conditions, then, must the great achievement be wrought out to-day, and there are many using the Lord's words, "How am I straitened till it be accomplished!" Still must the uttermost purgations be endured and the soul surrender itself to the Great Physician who, greatly desiring its beauty, operates upon it in mercy but permits no anæsthetic, lest the little personal consciousness fail to share for a moment His enduring, universal passion. Still, if you are to become His effective colleague in the work of general redemption, must it face that transforming ordeal which wrung from the illumined poet just mentioned the pathetic cry—

Ah, must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?

And still the answer comes "Fear not those things which thou art about to suffer. . . . Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life." But thus, in losing the separated, personal life to attain union and join forces with Vitality itself, is the new priesthood generated. Out of the ruins of the old self emerge the new man and the mystical consciousness which is his. "There ariseth another priest, after the similitude of Melchisedek, made not after the law of carnal commandment, but after the power of Endless Life" (Heb. vii. 15-16).

And the result, the object, of such sanctification, *cui bono*? A selfish gratification only? A reward

merely private to oneself? An attainment attended with gracious consequences exclusive to the individual who achieves it? Not so. Such to superficial thought it may *seem* to be. Such it *appears* to have been with those who, in the past, won their crown of life, but whose total bead-roll counts as nothing when contrasted with the multitudes that none can number who pass through this life's university without apparently graduating in spirituality at all, and often without coming even within ear-shot of the truths and principles upon which the inward life is based. But be assured that in the mystical life, whether in the past or in the present, no man liveth and none dieth to himself alone. How should he do in face of the foundation-truth that humanity is a unity, that we are members one of another? It is the gorgeous flower that justifies the muddy roots from which it has sprung. Spiritual fruition in any part is but the prelude, and an essential one, to the ultimate apotheosis of the whole. But consider the matter thus. While upon the Cross, the Master commended and gave up His spirit into the "hands"—the operative energies—of the Father; by so doing He became able later on to translate His body thither also. No one seems to have seen the hidden but vast significance of these two facts in their conjunction. Yet in them was shown forth a profound truth, becoming capable of wide realisation by disciples of the Master to-day, which may be declared thus: *Those who now, upon the cross of this life, commend and yield up their spirits into the selfsame "hands," in an utter self-dedication to the mystic life, become—even though unconsciously—the energy by which the whole gross body of humanity, here and in the unseen, will eventually be raised in glory. They are the little leaven that leavens, and lifts, the whole lump. Suffering themselves to be lifted up, they draw all other men unto them by a magnetic energy, the power of which few know or even dream of.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "All men living in earth be wonderfully holpen of this work, thou wottest not how; yea, the souls in purgatory be eased of their pain by virtue of this work" (*Cloud of Unknowing*, c. iii.).

It is in this sense that they are humanity's priests, though they may know it not and though their humility would reject so honorable a title. And the priest being ever a victim, they are essentially victims in the cause of the whole social organism. If I speak of their office as a new priesthood, it is not that none have fulfilled it before them, for through the Christian centuries all who have become united with the prototypical Priest have discharged it. It is because a new condition, a new order, a new quality of social life is coming into existence, one more homogeneous, one in which the parts are more closely interdependent and more responsive than ever before to spiritual currents infused into it. Entire humanity will profit imperceptibly from every individual self-sacrifice upon the altar of the mystic life, and, whilst thousands are labouring to ameliorate the common weal in external ways, peradventure it will be a handful of righteous men that shall save the social city in a spiritual sense.

Herein, then, are justified the dedications to the inward life—often regarded as so unpractical, so selfish. Yet those who lead it are true *praktikoi*, for they are engaged upon a work which of all other is truly profitable—the Great Work from which the wall-builder of the Mystic City said, "I cannot come down" (Neh. vi. 3). If it involve temporary attention to the highest interests of the personal self, at the cost of disaffection for things popularly held of value, it is only that that self may be forged into an effective instrument for incalculable ends, and remembering a word which affirms that he who loves father or mother, sister or daughter, before Me is not worthy to work in the great redemptive scheme. The true mystic life involves no desire for selfish spiritual aggrandisement at the expense, or beyond the present reach, of other men; if it did, it would not be the mystic life at all. It is—though again those who live it may not realise the fact—an oblation of that supreme love which "lays down its life for its friends" in a surrender of the personal self that will redound eventually to the redemption of all. It is but

doing one's duty to one's neighbour in the fullest possible sense.

To testify to the truths here outlined, to assist their attainment in those who share them, and to serve as a nexus of thought between such, is the purpose of *The Seeker*. It will be as hitherto, and perhaps more emphatically, a journal of applied religion, a witness to living truth, an expression of modern testimony to the Christ-doctrine in its deeper implications and present-day application. It will be a journal, therefore, of mysticism, but mysticism of that practical type which has often been described as the greatest force in the world. And that mysticism will be Christian; not merely because its literary expression will be in Christian terms; not only because the Christian idea connotes, not selfish quietism, but peace expressed in activity, love manifested in active life—for love is life in motion; but, and this chiefly, because of its dedications. Any power for good it may become will not be self-ascribed; it will be in virtue of the magic expressed in the simple but all-potent formula—*per Jesum Christum Dominum nostrum*.

Listening in the innermost for a watchword for those who henceforth will share its thought and aspirations, the message comes, "Be ye doers of the Word!" Not merely of the literal word, nor doers in the sense of jerky, intermittent acts of self-enforced conduct; such are good and necessary, like an engine's trials before attaining smooth and steady running, but they mark the beginner, not the proficient, in the work. But become functionaries of the eternal Word; be Christ-activities; dynamic centres so abandoned to, and charged with, the Life and Love Divine, so habituated to its energising through your own selflessness, that, in whatsoever you may be engaged, nothing but it *can* act through you. High or humble may be your preferment in the new priesthood; to things conventionally deemed sacred or things that are not, God knoweth;—to you nothing will be unholy. Certain bondsmen once were set aside to discharge humble offices of hewing wood and drawing water "for the

congregation and for the altar of the Lord" (Josh. ix. 27). So now; many are being called to a like bondage for the universal congregation and for the service of an altar which is the world itself. There cannot be too many "hewers of wood" to release the *latens Deitas* immured within close-grained minds; too many "drawers of water" to set flowing the Life-stream penned within stony breasts; it was of those obstacles to spirituality—obduracy of heart and wooden-headedness—that, pursuing the earlier imagery and not without a spice of humour, the later word was spoken "Raise the rock and you shall find Me; cleave the wood and there am I!" If no call comes, they also serve who by the altar only wait, bracing the arms of those who more actively minister by joining them in aspiration and intention. The unquickened elements of Eternal Being are all around you, awaiting transmutation. Time was when, looking out upon them and yearning to ingather those whose "house"—whose true self—was left desolate, the Master mourned over them because they would not. They would not; no, not then. But may be now they *will*; many seem so anxious. Moreover, He said they *would*, when, with eyes of wonder and blessing, toward them they saw someone "who cometh in the name (endued with the qualities) of the Lord." Many are so intently looking for a returning Christ, yet know not that His return must be within themselves, and within the persons of their fellow-men. Amid the busy world, then, or in your quiet hours, with the aspergillus of your unspoken, but not un-availing, thought you can at least sprinkle them with water of which you know the secret springs; you will help to fill some parched pool, or make some wilderness blossom. To the unawakened ones about you you can at least toss the censer-fumes of love, for charity faileth never; they will warm some chilly heart or startle it into life at suddenly perceiving the fragrance of a glorious unsuspected Presence. This at the least. But it may be that as you go your way among the throng, bearing the Treasure in your earthen vessel, from that mean monstrosity there will radiate That to which every

knee eventually will bow. It may be that some, for whom your unworthy but most necessary person has become the unconscious lens of vision, will confess: The Word has been made flesh and has dwelt among *us*; and—even now and here—*we* beheld His glory; He was full of grace and truth.